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Politeness in Children's Media: An Analysis of the Main Character's Strategies in the Malaysian English-Dubbed *Boboiboy*

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ABSTRACT

Politeness in children's animated series is often simplified or overlooked, raising concerns about the models of interaction presented to young audiences. Addressing the limited systematic analysis of politeness in childrens' animation, this study analyses the use of politeness strategies by the main character, BoBoiBoy, in selected episodes of the popular Malaysian children's animated series BoBoiBoy, English-dubbed Season 1. The study was guided by Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. The objective of the study was to identify the types of politeness strategies BoBoiBoy used, the most frequently used strategy, and the factors influencing his choices during interactions with other characters. This study adopted a qualitative content analysis of 10 transcribed episodes purposively sampled from the BoBoiBoy English Series 1 playlist available on Monsta Studio Sdn. Bhd. official YouTube channel. The findings revealed that bold on-record strategies were the most frequently used, reflecting direct communication in urgent or informal contexts. Meanwhile, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies were selectively applied to build rapport, show deference, or soften face-threatening acts. The study concluded that the *BoBoiBoy* politeness strategies choices were influenced by social distance, rank of imposition, and power dynamics. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of linguistic politeness and its role in modeling respectful communication in children's animated shows. Beyond enriching the scholarly discourse on politeness strategies, the study offers practical implications for content creators and educators in fostering positive language use in media targeted at young audiences.

Keywords: Politeness Strategies, Face-Threatening Acts, Bald On Record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, Off Record

INTRODUCTION

Media content, especially animated shows, may significantly influence children's social development and behaviour. These shows can be powerful tools for moulding young viewers' understanding of appropriate social interactions and cultural norms. They typically captivate children's attention with colourful characters, imaginative storylines, and age-appropriate themes. Some examples of classic animated series are *Looney Tunes* and *The Flintstones* and the more recent series are *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Peppa Pig*. While in Malaysia, some distinguished children's animated shows are *BoBoiBoy*, *Upin & Ipin*, *Supa Strikas*, and *Ejen Ali*. These programs have achieved iconic status, made movies, and had lasting cultural impact.

As animated media content is widely consumed among children, it is important to consider the influence of animated media portrayal of politeness strategies on children's linguistic politeness. Children's understanding and use of linguistic politeness can be improved through animated shows that portray politeness strategies. Poorly designed children's animated shows that portray implore or aggressive character interactions can negatively influence young viewers (Ebrahimkutty, 2023). Not only that, Matveeva and Mochalova (2023) highlight that main characters play a significant role in shaping young viewers; perceptions and developing their social behaviour through the use of politeness strategies. Children's utterances and linguistic development can also be influenced by the politeness strategies portrayed in animated media. Studies by Al-Abbas (2023) and Sitti et al. (2022) have also shown that children learn politeness through their social environment from an



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early age. Children's TV programs are thought to provide children with input comparable to speech directed at them by their parents or older siblings (Schlesinger et al., 2019). Animated cartoons can enhance children's language acquisition (Maranzana, 2022) and may also affect their learning of linguistic politeness. Therefore, it is important for media content creators, especially ones designed for children, to consider these strategies in their production.

While there is an increase in research that examines politeness strategies in various media and communication contexts, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding identifying a unified set of politeness strategies within children's animated series. This gap is particularly evident in the lack of studies that explore the possibilities of these strategies serving as an exemplary model for other local animation productions. Existing studies have primarily focused on politeness in live-action television programs, movies, and other adult-oriented media (e.g., Febriyani et al., 2023; Syaifuddin, 2022; Wati & Puspani, 2020). Children's animated shows, especially Malaysian animated series have received limited scholarly attention, compared to several animated movie analyses of international animations including *Turning Red* (Septaria & Ambalegin, 2023), *Encanto* (Dewi & Ayomi, 2023), and *Aladdin* (Wahyu et al., 2022). To help fill the gap, the present study chose *BoBoiBoy* as the focus for analysis especially for its popularity not only among Malaysian children and adults but also international viewers from the neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia and other regions around the globe. The series were produced by Animonsta Studios featuring a natural-born superhero able to manipulate earth, wind and lightning, and split himself into multiple versions to defend earth from alien threats. Using Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) as a guiding lens, the study seeks to:

- 1. identify the types of politeness strategies BoBoiBoy used when interacting with other characters;
- 2. analyse the most used politeness strategies by BoBoiBoy when interacting with other characters; and
- 3. investigate which of Brown and Levinson's factors of politeness strategies influences the politeness strategies used by BoBoiBoy when interacting with other characters.

It is hoped that the study would help shed light on understanding the application and adaptation of politeness strategies in the context of local children's media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Politeness strategies have been discussed comprehensively in the areas of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. Of all the theoretical frameworks, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) is the most distinct. It helps to explain how people mitigate and balance their actions to preserve positive social relationships. As defined by Brown and Levinson (1987), Politeness Strategies are the deliberation in communicative behaviour to encourage social harmony and respect in interactions. There are two components in this concept which are positive and negative faces. A positive face is the desire to feel liked by others, while a negative face is the desire to be free and autonomous. In communication, politeness strategies serve as linguistic techniques to address face needs and minimise potential face-threatening acts (FTAs). Politeness Strategies are applied for many reasons, including maintaining effective communication, showing respect, achieving communication goals, and others. All these reasons focus on their effects on the individual "face". Brown and Levinson (1987) highlight the four types of politeness strategies, arranging them from lesser to more significant risk. The choice of politeness strategy and its application within the context of face threat is demonstrated in Brown and Levinson's (1987) Flow Chart of Politeness Strategy Types.

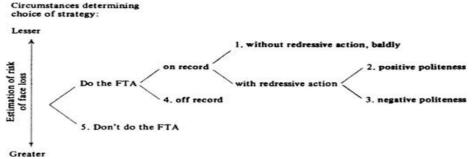


Figure 1 Brown and Levinson's (1987) flow chart of politeness strategy types



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As illustrated in Figure 1, the process starts with the speaker considering if an FTA is needed. If the act is performed with FTA considered, there are two possible paths to choose: on-record or off-record. On-record is direct and unambiguous form of communication. Once on- record is chosen, it is for the speaker to decide to act baldly or with redressive action. The former is direct and ensures no misunderstanding to the hearer but lacks politeness, while the latter involves application of politeness strategies either positive or negative to alleviate the threat. Positive politeness strategies take care of the hearer's positive face by using positive expressions such as expressing friendliness, solidarity, and appreciation. Alternatively, a speaker may choose negative politeness strategies which seek to mitigate imposition by being indirect, and apologetic in order to protect the hearer's negative face. Both positive and negative strategies have their own identifying mechanisms. There are three broad mechanisms for positive politeness strategies which are claiming common ground, conveying that the speaker and hearer are co-operators, and fulfilling the hearer's wants. Meanwhile, for negative politeness strategies the mechanisms are being indirect, not presuming or assuming, not coercing the hearer, communicating the speaker's desire not to disturb the hearer, and redressing other wants of the hearer (as cited in Fathi, 2024).

Off-record acts, on the other hand, are indirect and leave interpretation to the hearer. Off-record strategies are clues or ambiguous remarks that allow the speaker to evade confrontation and place the burden of interpretation on the hearer. The strategy helps the speaker avoid confrontation and allows the hearer to interpret the message according to their understanding. This will indirectly minimise face threat. In children's media content, Off-record strategies in children's animated shows can create humour or allow characters to handle sensitive situations delicately.

The selection of these strategies is determined by three social parameters which are, social distance, relative power, and the severity of the FTA (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The social distance factor refers to the degree of familiarity and closeness between the speaker and the hearer. The greater the social distance, the more polite the interaction. For instance, conversations between strangers are usually more formal and polite than those between close friends. Next, the power differences between the speaker and the hearer are the relative power factor. The higher the degree of control a hearer has over the speaker, the more polite the latter will be and vice versa. The third factor, the ranking of imposition, refers to the degree to which an action is considered an imposition in a particular culture. The more intense the imposition, the more incline the speaker is to use indirect and elaborated strategies.

Politeness Strategies in Children's Animation

Linguistic politeness is vital in reflecting and reinforcing cultural values. This is especially prominence in its representation within children's animation production. Recent reviews note Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Strategies framework remains influential yet often adapted to culture and medium. In the context of children's animated shows, characters who use Positive Politeness strategies can model positive social behaviour. It is expected for young viewers to learn empathy, cooperation, and respect for others. Negative portrayals, in the content, can contribute to the normalisation of disrespectful or aggressive behaviour. This will potentially influence children's conduct unfavourably. Additionally, a study by Sitti et al. (2022) has shown that children's understanding of politeness evolves when they are exposed to positive social cues. Thus, animated shows that carefully incorporate politeness strategies can effectively guide children's social development. Sitti et al. (2022) add that presenting clear examples of navigating social interactions politely can help children realise the importance of maintaining social harmony and respecting others' faces.

The extensive production of children's animated shows provides an interesting platform for the analysis of politeness strategies. Dewi and Ayomi (2023) highlight that applying politeness strategies in children's animated shows has significant implications for young viewers' social development. Muhammad and Aziz (2021) also stress that children's television shows can serve as a medium for children to learn about social interactions and cultural norms.

Many studies from various cultures have examined the media for children's politeness strategies and many were guided by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. For instance, findings from a study conducted by



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Fitri (2022) discovered that the main character in *Mulan* interchangeably used all types of politeness when speaking

to different characters due to the Chinese politeness culture called Wulun. In another study, the protagonist in *Turning Red* was found to frequently employ positive politeness strategies such as offering and promising to build rapport with other characters. His behaviour demonstrates a culture from the West that values being approachable and looking after one's social image. The character's speech was influenced by cultural norms that value being expressive and friendly (Septaria & Ambalegin, 2023). The main character in *Encanto* also relied on positive politeness strategies (Dewi & Ayomi, 2023). This corresponds to her Colombian cultural setting in the film where people are bound by strong familial ties and freely communicate as a social requirement which affects the anthropological aspects of the community.

In a study investigating Saudi children's television programs, Alaiyed (2023) found that positive politeness strategies, including in-group identity markers, and seeking agreement were employed by the main characters. This shows the use of cohesive and performative action strategies that are typical of the Arab culture, which is more collectivist and thrives on closeness, solidarity, and harmonious relationships. Similarly, the study by Alsuhaim (2024) looked at the dubbing of an English animated series on *Shahid and Netflix* and remarked that the protagonists' employment of politeness strategies in this scenario shifted and aligned more with the Arabic norms. In this case, negative strategies like indirect suggestions and softened rejections, which are less aggressive, were made to show non-imposition which in itself emphasises the courtesy and respect given to family members in the Arab culture. In a different study, Sari and Kaluge (2021) analysed politeness strategies in the Japanese anime series *Violet Evergarden*. This study showed how indirectness and honorifics are often used in the dialogue because of the Japanese culture's strong focus on hierarchy and respect which corresponds to the concept of Keigo. Moreover, a study that pertained to British culture was done by Yolanda and Bram (2022), where they analysed the politeness strategies employed in the British animated television show, *Peppa Pig*. The research found that the characters displayed a distinct feature of the British culture characterized by sarcasm as well as understatement while talking which is viewed as politeness.

The frequency of the politeness strategies choices found by all the studies is related to the factors proposed by Brown and Levinson. As stated earlier, the factors are social distance, relative power, and the ranking of imposition. Social distance was found to be the most influential factor, accounting for 95% of the choices, as stated in a study by Hutahaean et al. (2021). This means that speakers use more negative and Off-record politeness with people with higher social distance, such as strangers. Additionally, relative power, a factor that influences choices suggests that speakers use more politeness strategies when addressing those with higher power or authority. Considering the probability of lesser encounters of the characters with others of higher authority, the frequency of Positive Politeness may change. On the other hand, the ranking of imposition which refers to the degree to which an FTA was seen as an imposition on the hearer, more politeness strategies are required to save the "face" (Lamb, 2010).

A review of past studies shows recurring patterns and notable gaps. While the stability of politeness strategies across languages is prominent, how scripted media conveys these strategies to young audiences is still underexplored. Studies of animated series indicate positive and bald-on-record strategies as the most dominant, but most of the studies rely on small samples or concentrate on translation rather than full-series analysis. Moreover, there are mentions of factors to the choice of politeness strategies such as relative power, social distance, and imposition but their links to narrative roles or urgency are seldom discussed. Besides this, a comprehensive review of academic databases of scholarly articles including from Emerald Insight, Scopus, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and Elsevier between 2025-2020 publications using these keywords; politeness strategies, children media content, movie, film, politeness, polite, linguistic politeness, culture, Brown and Levinson, Malaysian animation, Malay animation revealed that there was a lack of studies addressing the politeness strategies in Malaysian animation. The lack of research addressing politeness strategies in Malaysian children's animated shows represents a significant gap in the literature. This gap is particularly noteworthy given Malaysia's unique cultural and linguistic context, which could influence the portrayal and interpretation of politeness in local animated content. These gaps underscore the need for systematic, episode-wide analysis of popular children's series to explain how politeness strategies function in context and what social lessons they are conveying.



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METHODOLOGY

A qualitative content analysis approach was employed to examine the politeness strategies used by BoBoiBoy when interacting with other characters. According to Lindgren et al. (2020), content analysis is one of the qualitative methods used to extract content of text data. This study used descriptive qualitative content analysis to help the researchers focused on interpreting data directly from the resources. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state that content analysis is applied in research involving communications, sociology, and political science. This type of analysis interprets data by extracting the meanings from people's perspectives. Thus, this study adopted the qualitative content analysis approach to reveal how linguistic choices reflect social norms and narrative roles, which is essential for understanding their potential influence on children's communication.

To ensure accuracy and completeness, the conversations between BoBoiBoy with other characters (i.e. Hanna, Ming, Gopal, Fang, Adu Du, and Probe) extracted from the 10 episodes were first sourced from the official *BoBoiBoy* English playlist on Monsta Studios' official YouTube channel. They were then transcribed using AI tools such as Microsoft Teams, Evernote, and TurboScribe. After transcription, incomplete or duplicate entries were removed before analysis. Each transcription was manually checked and polished to eliminate mistakes which were discovered during the review process. Only BoBoiBoy's speech was examined. It is essential to note that this study did not attempt to compare and contrast the English-dubbed episodes with the original Malay version as this would expand the study into a contrastive analysis which is not in the scope of the current study.

The coding framework for identifying the use of the politeness strategies was based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. This theory suggests that there are four main types of strategies: Bald on-record, Positive Politeness, Negative Politeness, and Off-record. The strategy employed was to observe and analyse BoBoiBoy's utterances from a holistic perspective and classify them into the devised strategies and these are not solely about pinpointing certain language features but rather involve understanding the purpose of the statement within the context it was made. In this study, the data were confined to BoBoiBoy's utterances in scenes involving significant tensions and resolutions as they elucidate various politeness methods and effectively demonstrate the dynamics of relative power, social distance, and imposition in character interactions. This allows for a deeper level of interpretation over frequency (Miles et al., 2014).

To ensure the reliability of data interpretation, an intercoder agreement was checked for consistency of the coding. It is often calculated through percentage agreement or Cohen's Kappa to confirm that coding decisions are stable across raters (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). In the present research, a second coder independently analyzed 20% of the transcripts using Brown and Levinson's categories, and discrepancies were discussed until consensus was reached. This step reinforces the dependability of the coding process. The validity of this study was measured by the methodology of the study and the alignment of the analysis with theoretical frameworks. The researchers ensured the data was representative of the research objectives by purposely sampling 10 episodes that contained key conversational moments. The content validity was further supported by transcription and coding of the types in a tabular form. The theoretical validity, on the other hand, was strengthened through the application of Brown and Levinson's model.

After the reliability and trustworthiness of the interpretation were checked, the frequency of the occurrence of the types was counted and recorded. Lastly, the factors influencing the choices of politeness strategies were analysed.

RESULTS

RQ1. What are the types of politeness strategies used by BoBoiBoy?

Table 1 shows a few excerpts of BoBoiBoy's utterances by strategy type and their specific context, sourced from the 10 selected episodes. Overall, Boboiboy uses all four politeness strategy types: bald on record, positive politeness, off record, and negative politeness. Directness mostly appeared in urgent fights or chase scenes. Positive politeness and apologies are most used in family repair with Tok Abah; hedging and rhetorical questions softened blame during capture scenes with Adu Du. In short, *BoBoiBoy* displays a balanced



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repertoire of action driven directness with relational repair. This helps expose children to mixed norms which are firm directives in danger and reconciling conversation in family contexts.

Table 1 Qualitative examples by strategy type

Strategy type	Excerpt (Boboiboy-hearer)	Function/Context
Bald on-record	"Where do you think you're going?" → Adu Du	Unmitigated challenge during pursuit
Bald on-record	"OK, enough enough." → Adu Du	Urgent stop command under stress
Positive politeness	"I promise to always listen to you after this." → Tok Abah	Relationship repair after neglect
Positive politeness	"Relax, man. I just sat down." → Gopal	Reassurance to ease tension with peer
Off-record	"Maybe you don't have spider senses maybe you have muscles of steel." → Gopal	Playful hedging to protect face
Off-record	"Why? Why are you doing this to me?" → Adu Du	Rhetorical appeal that softens accusation
Negative politeness	"I'm sorry, Tok Just go ahead and punish me." → Tok Abah	Admission of fault and deference

RQ2. Which politeness strategy is most used by Boboiboy?

Only 12 acts were coded for the politeness strategy they reveal. The small number resulted from focusing on acts that highlighted significant tensions and resolutions. These limitations are typically due to the characteristics of animated children's shows like BoBoiBoy, which is known for being short, fast-paced, and plot-driven. Table 2 displays the distribution of types of politeness strategies across the 12 coded acts from the reviewed episodes in both frequency and percentage counts. A sample line for each strategy type is also provided to anchor interpretation. Based on the results, it is evident that Bald on record accounted for 58% of instances (7/12), followed by positive politeness 17% (2/12), off record 17% (2/12), and negative politeness 8% (1/12). The prominence of direct commands and unmitigated questions aligns with high stakes scenes and peer familiarity, whereas affiliative or indirect moves appear around mentoring and emotional moments. Thus, the English dub frames problem solving through clear directives, yet it still models empathy and tact at key relational junctures. Practically, viewers may see that directness is legitimised by urgency while mitigation is called for by closeness and authority. It is noteworthy that this finding is context-dependent (i.e., dominant in conflicts and negotiation), hence not an exact representation of BoBoiBoy's overall politeness profile.

Table 2 Frequency and illustrative lines

Strategy type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Representative line
Bald on-record	7	58	"Hey, stop it. It's too big. It's going to explode."
Positive politeness	2	17	"I promise to always listen to you after this."
Off-record	2	17	"Maybe you have muscles of steel."
Negative politeness	1	8	"I'm sorry, Tok punish me."
Total	12	100	_



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RQ3. Brown and Levinson's influencing factors

Table 3 maps Brown and Levinson's factors which are relative power, social distance, and degree of imposition onto the instances of utterances that prompted a given strategy. Table 3 also summarises how each factor influenced BoBoiBoy's choice of politeness strategies. When power favoured Tok Abah, BoBoiBoy used apology or promise; when social distance was low with peers, direct questions were common; when imposition/urgency spiked, straightforward demands surfaced. Together, these factors jointly predicted strategy selection and explained the patterning seen in RQ1 and RQ2. Accordingly, the series portrays flexible politeness anchored to respect for authority and rapid action in conflict, which may scaffold children's sense of when to be direct and when to soften talk.

Table 3 Factors shaping strategy choice

Factor	Example excerpt	Resulting strategy	Interpreta-tion
Relative Power (Tok Abah > BoBoiBoy)	"I'm sorry, Tok Just go ahead and punish me."	Negative politeness (apology)	Respect to authority prompts mitigation
Social Distance (close peers)	"What do we do, Gopal?"	Bald on-record (brief query)	Familiarity allows concise, unhedged talk
Imposition/Urgency (threat)	"OK, enough enough."	Bald on-record (urgent stop)	Serious situations justify direct commands
Mixed (support + play)	"Maybe you have muscles of steel."	Off-record (hedging/humour)	Face-saving during supportive teasing

DISCUSSION

The study focused on analysing politeness strategies used by the main character in the BoBoiBoy's English series. The analysis on types of politeness strategies used by BoBoiBoy indicates that BoBoiBoy applies all four strategies—bald on record, positive politeness, off record, and negative politeness. These strategies shift form according to scene demands. Direct challenges and urgent stops are preferred in action and chase sequences; promises and apologies are applied in family repair; while hedging and rhetorical questions are prominent in supportive peer talk. This pattern aligns with cartoon research in which positive politeness and direct forms co-occur to keep plots moving yet maintain affiliation (e.g., Fitri (2022)). Among the four politeness strategies, bald on record was the most popular. Positive politeness and off record strategies were used moderately and negative politeness appeared the least. In practice, this means commands, warnings, and direct questions carry much of the heroic problem solving, whereas affiliative reassurance and playful hedging appear at emotional peaks. This pattern resonates with previous studies on cartoons that also found directness alongside warmth, though the present study finding leans more toward direct forms, likely due to the action centric scenes sampled (e.g., Alaiyed, 2023; Fiaz et al., 2024). Besides this, the finding on contexts influencing the choices of politeness strategies corresponds to other studies demonstrating that choices between off record and bald strategies were determined by relative power, social distance, and cultural expectation (e.g., Dewi & Ayomi, 2023; Kaluge, 2021; Septaria & Ambalegin, 2023).

The mapping of factors to utterances shows that power (e.g., Tok Abah's authority) invites apologies or promises, low social distance with peers permits brisk, unmitigated queries, and high imposition/urgency legitimises direct commands. Such dynamics parallel translation analysis by Alsuhaim (2024) where platform and culture shape the calibration of negative face scenarios, emphasising respect for elders and pragmatic fit. The findings also echo a systematic review of apology/request study by Kulsawang and Ambele (2024) that identified power and distance as stable predictors of strategy choice across EFL contexts. Taken together, the influencing factors consistently predicted BoBoiBoy's selection in ways theory would anticipate.



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Consequently, the English dub presents a clear rule of thumb for viewers: speak directly when danger is high or ties are close, but soften when authority is salient. This serves as guidance that children can readily apply.

Implications

The study explores ways linguistic politeness in children's animated shows is maintained through the application of politeness strategies that draw on the Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. It provides a foundation for researchers to further examine the representation of politeness in media and its potential impact on children's social and linguistic development. The findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the study amplifies Brown and Levinson's framework by confirming that power, distance, and imposition remain strong predictors of politeness strategy selection in scripted media, even in a dubbed context. Practically, the findings of the study suggest that animation productions and content creators can model respectful communication among the young viewers by balancing directional and relational strategies. These sets of strategies can be applied to produce dialogues that stimulate positive interpersonal communication skills. The findings of the study can also be used by educators to filter shows that align with the pre-set educational goals. Furthermore, the research highlights the importance of modelling respectful communication from positive media content. During co-viewing, for example, teachers and parents can use the insights from the study to guide discussions about the language use in the series. This is especially prevalent in the context where the children's series are dubbed in a language not native to the young viewers. Ultimately, the study underscores that animated series actively shape pragmatic norms, thus children's programs should be carefully designed.

CONCLUSION

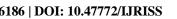
This study aims to see how politeness strategies in children's animated shows shape positive linguistic politeness using a Malaysian popular cartoon series, *BoBoiBoy*. The concepts of relative power, social distance, and rank of imposition presented by Brown and Levinson (1987) offer an insightful approach to studying the elements of politeness in children's animated shows. These elements are not just fundamental with regards to how the characters interact but also assist the young audience in understanding the complexity of social relations. With such considerations in mind, animated shows can help children learn how to operate in social situations in a respectful manner that builds positive relations and encourages appropriate behaviour in different settings. From this study, it is evident that children can learn how to communicate respectfully in different contexts if they could learn it from observing characters' interactions.

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